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Communication versus Value. On Two Places of the Interpretation of Music

In relation to the mystery of the work of art, of the literary or musical work, in relation to that 'deep text', being the seat of essential, integrating sense, interpretation takes on the dimension of a 'cognitive drama'; it is the scholar's expedition, filled with surprising events, into the unknown 'alien world of the work', gradually unveiled, but never ultimately mastered. According to Janusz Sławiński, who has investigated the 'place of interpretation' of the literary work, the discovery of that alien world, the overcoming of the otherness of the work, is effected in three ways: through analytical dismemberment, aimed at discovering familiar, standard elements; through establishing patterns of reference, contexts; through penetrating the heart of the work's semantic structure in the quest for the root sense, which lies beyond contextual relativisations.¹ Thus the scholar's path is delineated by the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of the work – three aspects that are in practice inseparable, conditioned, as they are, by interdependencies.

In the analytical approach, Sławiński distinguishes four separate paths, marked out by rival conceptions of the structure of a work: the most traditional distinction between content and form competes with the tectonic conception, the phenotype/genotype conception and a fourth conception which treats the work as a kind of communicational situation, directing attention towards dialogue and interpersonal relations.² The choice of one of these paths determines a further route in search of the hidden scheme of references within the work. Adopting the evaluative approach, meanwhile, signifying the striking-up of a lively dialogue with

¹ Janusz Sławiński, *Miejsce interpretacji* [The place of interpretation] (Gdańsk, 2006), 64.

² *Ibid.*, 26–27.

the work and – through it – with its creator, as one of the forms of interpretational activity, is present in its initial phase, since the work, a uniquely organised entity, challenges the receiver to pass emotional judgment, demands subjective, emotional involvement and response to value.³

In Sławiński's proposition of situating the 'art of interpretation, defining its area, within the realm of academic knowledge about literature', one's attention is drawn to two points in particular, to two places of the interpretation of the work, resulting from its immanent and at once also universal properties: the aspects of communication and value. These aspects are all the more crucial in that they concern not only literary works, but all fields of art. And so taking the trouble – on this level of generality – to consider the interaction of these aspects that occurs in interpretational activity might – one would expect – bring benefits for reflection on music as well, for the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of the musical work.

An essential priority here will be to examine the notion of communication. It is a truism that limiting its scope to the transmission of information, inadequate even in relation to any form of linguistic activity, would lead to a particularly advanced reductionism in the case of the work of art: of literature, fine art or, even more so, music. This last artistic discipline, where protests against treating music as merely a bearer of data have been particularly forceful, emphasising its autonomy from (occasionally present) extra-musical content, perhaps best brings home the absurdity of such a reductionist view.

Meanwhile, the expression 'communicating oneself', so readily adopted by musicology from literary theory, is supposed to illuminate the peculiarity or distinctness of the act of literary, poetic or musical communication, irreducible to relations and values of any other type.

And yet could it possibly be wholly adequate to explain the distinctness of the transmission of aesthetic communication by means of Roman Jakobson's law that poetical function involves transferring the principle of equivalence from the axis of sign selection (paradigmatics) to the axis of combinations (syntagmatics), and, as a consequence, focussing on the form⁴ of the message?⁵

³ Ibid., 6–7.

⁴ And can one not detect in Jakobson's rule, in relation to the work of art, the traditional distinction between form and content? How useful is it as a tool for bringing order to transcoding, the multiplication of language and palimpsestness, frequently invoked for the diagnosing of the nature of contemporary acts of communication?

⁵ See Aleksander Kiklewicz, *Język, komunikacja, wiedza* [Language, communication and knowledge] (Mińsk, 2006), 58–59.

Michał Głowiński perceived this peculiarity of communication in the literary work in the arising of a particular tension between the emitter and the receiver of literary 'communication', in the forming of a communicational situation marked by structural asymmetry, by a difference in the roles of its participants – a relationship made manifest in the context of the literary trend.⁶

In order to seek, following the path beaten by Głowiński, a satisfactory answer to the above-discerned questions as to the extent to which the notion of communication is inscribed in the specific nature of works belonging to a particular artistic discipline (both 'representational' art and also art devoid of the element of representation) and the extent to which this notion may be helpful in fathoming the secret of the work, reference should be made to the most broadly understood, existential, notion of communication, embracing the entirety of the human organism's interaction with its living environment, occurring on many levels – from the organic, the physical, to the spiritual.⁷ Communication is then perceived – in its broadest understanding – as a way of acquiring knowledge about existence, as the experiencing of the world by the human individual, and particularly as the experiencing of oneself and of others.

Such an understanding of the notion of communication means placing its point of gravity, not in the fact of communicating, but in the domain of the person, of his/her world of experiences, his/her relationships with other persons and their experiences. Were we to decide on a reduction of this kind and to narrow down the notion of communication to interpersonal relations, it would turn out that – to use the language of Emmanuel Lévinas – the foundation of communication is 'a radical shift from cognition to solidarity', seeking understanding with another person, the forming of a bond involving responsibility, which gains the status of a *sine qua non*. This is because, '[...] communication is only possible in sacrifice, which means coming closer to that person for whom one is responsible'; it requires one to abandon the cautious protection of the I and the radical opening-up to the Other, '[...] a transcending of oneself and expropriation, a convulsion in which "I" [...] am sacrificed'.⁸ In the fact of communication understood according to Lévinas's interpretation, the

⁶ Michał Głowiński, *Dzieło wobec odbiorcy. Szkice z komunikacji literackiej* [The work and its receiver. Sketches from literary communication] (Kraków, 1998), 26–29.

⁷ Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don P. Jackson, *Menschliche Kommunikation: Formen, Störungen, Paradoxien* (Bern and Stuttgart, 1969), 239 ff. [Eng. orig. *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (New York, 1967)].

⁸ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Inaczej niż być lub ponad istotą*, trans. Piotr Mrówczyński (Warsaw, 2000), 200–201 [Fr. orig. *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Hague, 1974)].

question of the transmission of data, the acquisition of knowledge, is all but absent, and certainly recedes into the background.

There is no question that this radical change, observed by Lévinas, that occurs in subjects communicating with one another, their mutual opening-up and self-sacrificing, the forming of a relationship of responsibility between persons through the situation of communication, of dialogue, leads directly to the need to incorporate ethical questions into discussion of the places of interpretation of the artistic work, as their actual, albeit perhaps unperceived, foundation.

So should the answer to the question as to the specific nature of the communication realised by the work of art, and of the musical work in particular, be sought in the realm of ethics? After all, the work undoubtedly contains the chance for interpersonal relations to arise, involving a dialogue between the creator and the receiver, in which the principle of asymmetry places both participants in the act of communication within the field of responsibility.

This axiological trail of reflection seems all the more permissible (and all the more appealing) in that it constitutes a significant contrast to the antihumanism ubiquitously propagated today – that negative reply to the question of man's connection with himself, with others and with the world.⁹ But given the collapse of meaning, the fall of ideology, the triumph of individualism and 'ethical emptiness', may we expect any help in our deliberations over the nature of the work of art from ethics? In describing the current state of this axiological discipline, Jacqueline Russ states that, paradoxically, it is in the very topos of ethical emptiness that the ethics of the present is born, that a 'new ethics' emerges, revealing the axiological foundation on which it will be possible to validate the world of human culture.¹⁰ It is the tenet of responsibility that becomes the foundation of this ethics.

The symptoms of disorientation in contemporary art, humanities or culture that can be observed in the writings of many thinkers need not lead to agnosticism and a sense of defeat, as there also exist diagnoses of the situation of culture in the postmodern era which are aimed at healing. The most perspicacious of these, focussing attention on analysing the condition of contemporary man, undoubtedly include the detailed study of the crisis in the humanities and the crisis of human identity, explaining the reasons for disorientation in our understanding of the truth about

⁹ Andrzej Miś, *Filozofia współczesna: główne nurty* [Contemporary philosophy: the principal currents] (Warsaw, 2006), 222.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Russ, *Współczesna myśl etyczna*, trans. Agnieszka Kuryś (Warsaw, 2006), 5 ff [Fr. orig. *La pensée éthique contemporaine* (Paris, 1998)].

man and showing us the way back from a 'defective anthropology' to an 'adequate anthropology', contained in the thinking of John Paul II.¹¹ The accuracy of the diagnosis formulated by Karol Wojtyła results from his philosophical conception of man, of the human being, that has crystallised gradually over a succession of works.

Wojtyła presents a phenomenological analysis of man, based on the identification of the source experience of the human being in the act. 'Man acts': this dynamic conjoining, strict correlativity, semantic equivalence and co-dependence of 'act' and 'person' allows us to regard the act as a particular moment in which a person reveals himself – the most appropriate starting point for understanding his dynamic essence.¹² The act is conscious action; *actus humanus* is *actus voluntarius*. In this way the personalistic value of the act is constituted: its accomplishment is in itself a value, which conditions and anticipates moral value, which always – and exclusively – belongs to the human being. The 'person/act' is an integral whole; in the act, the person, constituting a psychophysical unity, manifests itself: 'When I act, then I am whole in my action, in this dynamising of my own "I" to which I have causatively contributed'.¹³ Hence a person becomes, through morally good or bad acts, good or bad himself.

The work of art, being a particular kind of message, is at the same time a human act, a bearer of values, not only containing its own value as an object made by the hand of its creator, but also – in some way – manifesting, revealing the value of its creator. In this way we may explain the strict connection, postulated by Roman Ingarden, between the work of art and the person, who forges a bond with it or who creates it. On this basis, Ingarden states that the value of the work of art justifiably expects an adequate assessment and recognition of its specificity by those who come into contact with it.¹⁴

Thus the act of communication, the medium of which is the work of art (and the work of music), ultimately involves the communication of value.

This conclusion prompts one to pose further questions, concerning the kind of values that are transmitted and their structuring. Is it possible to discover a single supreme value which could be called constitutive, essential, for the work of art as such? Were the answer positive, then perhaps

¹¹ Jan Galarowicz, *Blask godności. O etyce Karola Wojtyły i nie tylko* [The splendour of dignity. On the ethics of Karol Wojtyła and more] (Kęty, 2005).

¹² Karol Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn* [Person and act] (Kraków, 1969), 13–15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 202–203.

¹⁴ Roman Ingarden, 'Phenomenological Aesthetics: an Attempt at Defining its Range', in *Phenomenology. Critical Concepts in Philosophy*, vol. 3 *Phenomenology on Science, Art, and Ethics*, ed. Dermot Moran and Lester E. Embree (London and New York, 2004), 202.

an attempt to rebuild the deconstructed twentieth-century aesthetics, to find for it an axiological foundation, would have a chance of succeeding.

A certain orientation for deliberations in the field of axiology may be the aspect of the work understood as an act of communication, and especially its dialogical dimension, the place where interpersonal connections are formed. In this context, it becomes evident that the autonomy of aesthetic value, established by Immanuel Kant and later undermined on numerous occasions, is inadequate. Beauty, which Kant relates to the sphere of subjective emotions, does not fit into the Kantian categorisation, as Hans-Georg Gadamer noted.¹⁵ In contrast to Kant, Gadamer regarded beauty as a value that is equivalent, or even identical, to truth, and he termed the way in which it exists 'radiance'. In Gadamer's conception, the very existence of beauty is the manifestation, the illumination, the revelation of being.¹⁶ Given that, as Gadamer sees it, 'The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real',¹⁷ it comes as no surprise that in his understanding beauty is most fully manifest in works of art, the most privileged place of the manifestation and shining of beauty, and thereby of the truth of being.¹⁸ Beauty – realised in art – is one of the forms of self-understanding.

One cannot fail to notice that in this way Gadamer, focussing his attention on the value of the work, poses the question of the anthropological basis of the experiencing of art.¹⁹ Its triadic structure, comprising the three notions of play, symbol and festival, contains implicitly the aspect of communication, of dialogue, of the forming of interpersonal ties built on the foundations of ethics. In the Gadamerian conception of the value of art, we may also find a discernible, albeit not salient, consonance with the anthropology of Karol Wojtyła: the work is an act, an experience that changes both its creator and its receiver. Gadamer's view is also not far removed from Ingarden's intuition of the radical unification of the subjective and objective aspects in the experiencing of art.²⁰

The evoking of the axiological conception of the work of art formulated by Gadamer is a consequence of choosing a line of reflection derived

¹⁵ See Elżbieta Wolicka, 'Piękno pozoru. Dekonstrukcja wartości estetycznych w hermeneutyce H.-G. Gadamera' [The beauty of appearance. The deconstruction of aesthetic values in the hermeneutics of H.-G. Gadamer], in *Człowiek wobec wartości* [Man and value], ed. Jarosław Jagiełło and Władysław Zuziak (Kraków, 2006), 48–63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1986), 15.

¹⁸ See Elżbieta Wolicka, 55.

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 22.

²⁰ See Elżbieta Wolicka, 56–57.

from that place of interpretation which is the act of communication realised in the work. This 'communicational' trail leads, in a roundabout way, to an essentially Platonic crowning of Gadamer's construct: wherever we come across a representation, manifestation, indication, depiction or symbolisation, we are dealing with a manifestation or 'flashing' of the truth of being. But this is the flashing at the same time of beauty and good, since beauty is in essence a glimpse of the truth, and good is an aspect of the return of being to itself.

Treated separately, communication and value, which I have called (inspired by the title of Sławiński's essay) two places of interpretation, would not provide sufficient grounds on which to consider the essence of the work of art, or of the work of music in particular. However, it has proved possible to clarify the notion of communication, to focus attention on its broader, anthropological aspect, which would be termed more correctly a communicational situation in which persons meet; the act of communication takes place within the field of responsibility. Yet this broad notion, encompassing not only art, directed our attention towards the question of the value of a work of art, providing reasons for locating it in another, broader perspective, not closed to the problems posed by anthropology and ethics. The notion of value, meanwhile, not restricted to *aisthesis*, but extended to embrace also the sphere of ethical questions, made it possible to clarify the nature of communication in the work of art: it is an act of communication in the world of value. The work is not so much the bearer, the conduit of value, as a place in which value becomes a message.

Translated by John Comber

